DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 059 829 RC 005 998

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TITLE Value Conflicts Experienced by Mexican-American Students.
PUB DATE [68]
NOTE 11p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Culture Conflict; Discussion Groups; *Dropout Research; Educational Attitudes; *Mexican Americans; Parent Attitudes; Racial Integration; Secondary School Students; Socioeconomic Background; *Student Attitudes; Teacher Education; *Values

ABSTRACT

The object of this study, conducted in a Northern California city school district, was to find evidence of cultural value conflicts experienced by Mexican American secondary school students of low socioeconomic background. Those students experiencing the most difficulty in adjusting to the school setting and thus most likely to be dropouts were interviewed, observed in class, and asked to tell stories about pictures depicting students, teachers, and parents interacting in a school setting. Stories told about these pictures revealed Mexican American value conflicts in terms of such factors as loyalty to family and ethnic group, female modesty, machismo, the role of education, and separation of sex roles. This paper contains discussions of 8 Mexican American values found to conflict most often with the value system of schools, along with an accompanying story for each as told by Mexican American students; also contained are 1-paragraph discussions of 4 measures that could be instituted to help alleviate value conflicts. (NQ)

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VALUE CONFLICTS EXPERIENCED BY MEXICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

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[1968]

The high drop out rate among Mexican-American junior high and high school students is alarming. In her book titled Mexican-American Youth Celia Heller points out that a study of several high schools in the Los Angeles area revealed that up to 30% of all Mexican-American students drop out before completion of the twelfth grade. These facts should be of concern not only to Mexican-Americans but to everyone in this country. It is obvious that with the present trend of increasing automation there will be a decreasing demand for agricultural workers and unskilled laborers. This means that thousands of Mexican-Americans who do drop out will be without employment. The feelings of frustration, worthlessness, and loss of self esteem which result due to unemployment have long been recognized by social scientists as major causes of physical and mental illness as well as social unrest.

A study by Dr. George Demos of Long Beach State College identified some attitudes toward education held by Mexican-American students. His study was particularly meaningful because it controlled for the effects of socio-economic class differences. The results of the study revealed that there were considerable differences in attitudes expressed by Mexican-American and Anglo students, with the Mexican-American students expressing attitudes which were less positive. Specifically, the Mexican-American students held the following attitudes toward the

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educational system: 1. Teachers did not understand them. 2. They did not feel that the staff of the school was concerned about them. 3. They felt it was not important to maintain a good attendance record. 4. They thought it desirable to drop out of school before graduation.

The question, then, arises as to why Mexican-American students have such negative attitudes, and are experiencing so much difficulty in attempting to adjust to the demands of the school system. There is little doubt that some of these difficulties are in part due to the fact that many of these children are bilingual, and it is, therefore, commendable that some school districts are now focusing on this by instituting bilingual programs. Equally important, however, are problems which are due to cultural value conflicts. Most Mexican-American children in the Southwest spend the early years of their lives almost exclusively in the Mexican-American barrios (neighborhoods) of cities and towns. Here they come to adopt a system of beliefs and coping techniques which is far different from those of the Anglo middle class. In addition they learn to model themselves after Mexican-American adults who in many instances are quite well identified with the Mexican-American culture and in some cases even critical of the Anglo ways. Several studies have identified the values which the Mexican-American child comes to accept (See Madsen, Clark also Ramirez) and have noted that many of these values come in direct conflict with those of the Anglo middle class teachers and administrators in our schools.

A recent study by the author and a colleague (Ramirez and Taylor) in a school district in a Northern California city has

uncovered direct evidence of these conflicts as they are being experienced by the Mexican-American junior high and high school student of the low socio-economic class. By assessing attitudes toward education and reviewing the cummulative files of 300 Mexican-American students the researchers were able to identify those students who were experiencing most difficulty in adjusting to the school setting and, thus, seemed to be those most likely to drop out in the near future. These students were interviewed, observed in class, and were asked to tell stories to pictures depicting students, teachers, and parents interacting in a school setting. The stories told to these pictures were very revealing in terms of value conflicts and their effect on the adjustment of the student and his attitudes toward the school. The Mexican-American values which were found to conflict most often with the value system of the schools are revealed in the following stories given by the Mexican-American students to the picture cards.

1. The Mexican-American culture teaches the adolescent to be loyal to his family group. This frequently results in subordination of the student's educational goals when the family is in need of his help. Description of picture: Portrays a father sitting at the table and a Mexican-American boy leaving the house with books in hand.

"This boy and his father are very unhappy. The father just lost his job and he is worrying about what will happen to his family. The boy is sad also. He wants to continue in school because he is doing so well, but he knows he cannot abandon his family now that they need him the most. He will drop out of school and get a job. He cannot turn his back on his family when they are in need."

Description of picture: Teacher and student in a classroom.

"The teacher is angry with this student because she cannot keep her mind on her work. She also has not been doing her homework. The student has problems at home and cannot concentrate, but she feels it would be wrong to reveal family matters to the teacher. The family needs income and she is thinking of helping them out. She drops out and starts working at a job with a low rate of income. As the years go by all her life she dreams of going back to school but she can't because now she is too old."

The two stories above clearly point out that the Mexican-American child's loyalty to his family and his unwillingness to reveal family problems to non-relatives creates conflicts with teachers and administrators who come from Anglo middle class backgrounds where children are more willing to talk about family problems and are most often not obligated to contribute to the family's finances.

2. The Mexican-American culture emphasizes the continued loyalty of its members to the group. Traditional Mexican-Americans see themselves as united in a spritual bond as member of La Raza (the race) and feel obligated to contribute to the welfare of all the members. A person who becomes Anglicized and forgets the other members of his group is looked upon as a traitor. This frequently places the Mexican-American student in conflict. He doesn't know if he should abandon his culture and accept the values of the school or vice versa.

Description of picture: Shows a Mexican-American student sitting at a desk with a teacher standing close by.

"This boy is being scolded by the teacher for speaking a language

that wasn't English on the school grounds. The boy doesn't know what to do. He doesn't want to make the teacher angry, but he also knows his friends are watching him and if he doesn't stand up for his rights and for his people they will call him a traitor. The teacher tells him not to do it again or she will send him to the principal. He continues to do it and is suspended for three days."

3. The Mexican-American parent sees himself as an educator in his home. Mother and father, thus, consider learning experiences for the child in the home to be just as valuable as the education he receives at school. Children must be acquainted with their roles as men and women in the culture, because their behavior outside the home reflects on the family. Needless to say Anglo teachers and administrators are not aware of this. So that misunderstandings between parents, students, and teachers occur often.

Description of picture: Father sitting at a table and a Mexican-American girl, books in hand, is walking in the door.

"Her father was waiting for her and he is disgusted because the girl came in late and he wanted her home early. She was supposed to take care of her little brothers and sisters and to do some housework. He tells her that she must never forget the work she must do at home and that work at home is just as important as the work at school. From then on she always went home on time no matter what."

4. The culture emphasizes "machismo" or maleness in the young boy. He learns he must never run away from a fight or break a deal, and he must defend his honor whenever it is insulted. The young male student's "machismo" is sometimes threatened by unsuspecting female teachers who are interested in maintaining their authority in the classroom at all cost.

Discription of picture: A Mexican-American boy sitting at a desk and a teacher standing close by.

"The teacher caught this boy day dreaming in class. She asked him a question and now he can't answer. She takes him to the front of the room and goes over the lesson with him so everyone can see him. The boy feels very humiliated, he knows he must defend his honor as a man in front of his friends. He sasses the teacher back and she refers him to the principal."

5. The culture teaches young women to be modest and not to display their bodies in public. This usually creates problems in gym class where students are required to wear shorts and then take a shower with little or no privacy. Teachers often do not understand why Mexican-American girls refuse to attend gym and often attribute this to negativism and laziness.

Description of picture: A young female teacher lecturing to a Mexican-American girl.

"The teacher is mad at the girl because she won't strip down for gym. The girl is unhappy because she cannot explain to the teacher that she feels embarrassed to take her clothes off in front of the others. The teacher becomes angry because the girl doesn't answer and she just looks down. She sends her to the principal."

6. Mexican-American parents especially those from rural areas and of the low socio-economic class look upon education as helpful only if it involves some degree of job training. The Mexican American child often comes to expect the same thing. This expectation is frequently not met by the schools who are usually more interested in preparing students for college. The result is

frustration and dissatisfaction for all concerned.

Description of picture: Boy sitting at a desk staring at some papers and books.

"This boy is angry and disgusted. He is not interested in school. He dreams of having a good job, but instead of learning this he has to do other things. He feels left out because he is not going to college. He feels like the school doesn't care about him and what he wants. In the future he will drop out and look for a job, but since he doesn't have a high school education he will have a rough time of it."

7. The culture emphasizes a strict separation of the sex roles. The role of the male is established as the breadwinner and head of the family. The female provides the love and understanding which her children and husband will need, her role being one of self-sacrifice and abnegation. The cultural values to which the Mexican-American school child is exposed to in the schools challenges this view. The individual is then forced to make a difficult choice.

Description of picture: Boy and girl taking to each other.

"That is her boyfriend and they just left the coffee shop. Well he wants her to marry him now and she wants to got to college and be a doctor. He got mad because he wants her to be his wife and the mother of his children. She looks like she will continue to go to school and just break off with him."

Description of picture:

Mexican-American girl sitting at a desk and mother standing at the door.

"The mother was probably calling the daughter and she wouldn't

come. The girl is doing her homework and didn't pay attention. Her mother is mad at her and the girl doesn't know what to do. She will give her a lecture about how important it is for a girl to learn to do housework instead of just reading books."

8. Mexican-American parents are frequently taken aback by the business-like harsh tone frequently used by teachers to communicate with them when they visit the schools. This usually results in alienation with the school being seen as a negative rather than a positive institution.

Description of picture: Mexican-American parents and teacher in classroom.

"These are parents at the school. They look sad and self conscious. The teacher is talking to them about their child. She tells them their child is flunking and she is getting after them for not seeing to it that the child passes the course. So they go home and have a talk with the child but after being scolded by the teacher they are disgusted with the school."

The foregoing stories collected during the course of our study, thus, shed considerable light on the etiology of negative attitudes toward education in Mexican-American students and parents. They show that the Mexican-American student brings values with him to the school which in many cases are in direct opposition to those of their teachers, counselors, and principals. Not only must the bi-cultural student face conflicts at school, he also meets conflicts at home when the values he learns at school are opposed by parents. They are, thus, continually faced with the ominous choice of conforming or quitting. This usually results in

feelings of insecurity and eventually in negative feelings toward the school which they come to see as the source of their frustration and unhappiness.

Fortunately, these difficulties are not insurmountable. Our society has the tools available to help the Mexican-American student achieve a more desirable and comfortable adjustment of the school setting. The following are some measures which could be instituted to help alleviate value conflicts.

1. We must institute teacher training programs which seek to acquaint teachers with the cultural values of the various ethnic groups. Some of this is being done now, but for the most part these programs place the teacher or student teacher in a passive role. More use should be made of role playing techniques so that the teacher can become more involved in the training and actually learn how to cope with these problems when they arise in the classroom. In addition, allowing teachers to interview children of various ethnic groups would make the problems of these children more real to the teacher in training.

2. Group discussions of ethnic group differences between students should be encouraged. These could be supervised by counselors. The goal would be to get the students to understand value conflicts and handle them in a realistic way when they arise. This would be helpful not only to the non-Mexican-American but also to the Mexican-American who heretofore has experienced the conflicts daily but has never been able to identify them and, thus, use adequate problem solving methods to reduce the stress.

3. Defacto segregation should be eliminated in a climate of acceptance of cultural diversity. This allows for children of

all cultural and racial backgrounds to meet each other on an equal basis and exchange ideas. The student must not come to feel that he must be stripped of his culture in order to be accepted or be successful in school.

4. Compensatory educational programs must come to grips with the issue of value conflicts. The author is convinced that no matter how much instructional techniques are improved, negative feeling will continue to exist in the Mexican-American if he continues to face value conflicts.

It is well to remember that Mexican-American students and especially those who come from lower socio-economic class backgrounds will in general be more identified with the Mexican-American value system discussed above. Long before they begin their school careers they will already have achieved an identity within the Mexican-American group. This identity cannot be destroyed without there being negative consequences for the individual and others in his milieu. The research of anthropologists such as Spindler and Hallowell has shown that you cannot strip an individual of his culture without also stripping him of his identity. The search for humanistic and realistic solutions to this problem, then, becomes not only urgent but imperative as well.

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